



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY.

PRIMITIVE DEMOCRACY IN BRITISH TRADE- UNIONISM.¹ I.

THE first problem which trade-unionists have had to solve is that of all governments. They have had to construct an administration able to perform with efficiency the functions entrusted to it. But efficiency is not the principal requirement. In the narrow range of the artisan's life trade-union membership is no small matter. It demands from him the weekly renewed sacrifice of perhaps three per cent of his income. It involves, moreover, his subordination in all the essential conditions of his working life to rigid rules settled for him by the representatives of his trade. Now, though it is conceivable that a strong trade union might coerce a few individual workmen to continue in its ranks against their will, no such coercive influence could permanently prevail over a discontented majority, or prevent the secession, either individually or in a body, of any considerable number who were seriously disaffected. The persistence of any trade union is, therefore, fundamentally dependent on the continuous assent of the great bulk of its members to its objects and policy. The frequency with which, in our *History of Trade-Unionism*, we have had to describe the crumbling away of membership, or the secession of whole branches or sections of a trade, proves that, at any rate in trade-union organization, the continuous assent of the governed is the primary condition of existence.

¹ Copyright, 1896, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

Here we must make a distinction which will, in the course of this article, be seen to be of vital importance. It is often assumed that the necessary basis for such popular administration is secured by referring all important proposals to the vote of the whole body concerned. But the "continuous" assent of the "governed," which is so indispensable a condition of all trade-union government, is an assent, not to the projects, proposals or programs of the governing body, but to the actual working results of its administration week by week. The average member expects from his trade union certain tangible advantages, in the shape either of friendly-society benefits or of improved conditions of work. By what expedients these ends are to be attained — the constitutional form, the particular trade regulation, the exact scale of receipts and payments — is a matter upon which the great mass of citizens, the "common lump of men," have no opinion of their own. The more active-minded among the members are, it is true, ready enough to vote one way or the other on any question that may be put before them. But even the keenest trade-unionist judges his society by results alone; and if these are not to his liking, the fact that he is but suffering the consequences of his own vote will not prevent him from denouncing or abandoning an executive which has perhaps done no more than carry out his orders. It may at first sight seem that this comes only to saying that a trade-union government, to be popular, must secure the welfare of the governed. But this is quite beside our meaning. Trade-unionists, like other classes, are not prepared to accept implicitly the judgment of even the wisest of their own leaders as to what they should aim at. Whether or not a particular trade-union regulation promotes the real well-being of the members, — a point on which opinions will always differ, and on which no final judgment can ever be passed, — it must at any rate commend itself to them week by week by obtaining, if only imperfectly, what they actually desire, whether this is good for them or not. In short, the continued success of trade-union administration depends on obtaining the members' approval, not so much of each separate act of the executive, or even of each

piece of tactics or line of policy, but of the actual results which these expedients produce in the every-day life of the trade concerned. Thus democracy, which in the affairs of a nation is only one among several alternative forms of government, is in trade-unionism the only possible basis of association. Trade-union history is, therefore, the record of a century-long experiment in every variety of popular self-government.

In the local trade clubs of the eighteenth century, democracy appeared in its simplest form. The members of each trade, in general meeting assembled, themselves made the regulations, applied them to particular cases, voted every expenditure of funds, and decided on such action by individual members as seemed necessary for the common weal. Like the citizens of Uri or Appenzell¹ the eighteenth-century workmen were slow to recognize any other authority than "the voices" of all concerned. The early rules were accordingly occupied with securing the maintenance of order and decorum at these general meetings of "the trade" or "the body." With this view the president, often chosen only for the particular meeting, was treated with great respect and invested with special, though temporary, authority. Thus the constitution of the London Society of Woolstaplers, established 1785, declares

that at every meeting of this society a president shall be chosen to preserve the rules of decorum and good order; and if any member shall not be silent on due notice given by the president, which shall be giving three distinct knocks on the table, he shall fine threepence; and if any one shall interrupt another in any debate while addressing the president, he shall fine sixpence; and if the person so fined shall return any indecent language, he shall fine sixpence more; and should any president misconduct himself, so as to cause uproar and confusion

¹ The early trade-union general meetings have, indeed, many interesting resemblances, both in spirit and in form, to the *Landesgemeinden*, or general meetings of all citizens, of the old Swiss Cantons. The best description of these archaic Swiss democracies, as they exist to-day, is given by Eugène Rambert in his work *Les Alpes Suisses: Études Historiques et Nationales* (Lausanne, 1889). J. M. Vincent's *State and Federal Government in Switzerland* (Baltimore, 1891) is more precise and accurate than any other account in the English language. Freeman's picturesque reference to them in *The Growth of the English Constitution* (London, 1872) is well known.

in the society, or shall neglect to enforce a strict observance of this and the following article, he shall be superseded, and another president shall be chosen in his stead. The president shall be accommodated with his own choice of liquors, wine only excepted.¹

And the Articles of the Society of Journeymen Brushmakers, to which no person was to be admitted as a member "who is not well-affected to his present Majesty and the Protestant succession, and in good health, and of a respectable character," provide

that on each evening the society meets there shall be a president chosen from the members present to keep order ; to be allowed a shilling for his trouble ; any member refusing to serve the office to be fined sixpence. If any member dispute on politics, swear, lay wagers, promote gambling or behave otherwise disorderly, and will not be silent when ordered by the chairman, he shall pay a fine of a shilling.²

The rules of almost every old society, indeed, focus the attention of its members on this general meeting. Whilst political or religious wrangling, seditious sentiments or songs, cursing, swearing or obscene language, betting, wagering, gaming or refusing to keep silence were penalized by fines, elaborate and detailed provision was made for the entertainment of the members. Meeting, as all clubs did, at a public house in a room lent free by the landlord, it was taken as a matter of course that each man should do his share of drinking. The rules often prescribe the sum to be spent at each meeting ; in the case of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders, for instance, the member's monthly contribution in 1809 was a shilling "to the box," and threepence for liquor, "to be spent whether present or not." The brushmakers provided "that on every meeting night each member shall receive a pot ticket at eight o'clock, a pint at ten o'clock, and no more."³ And the Manchester compositors

¹ The Articles of the London Society of Woolstaplers (London, 1813).

² Articles of the Society of Journeymen Brushmakers, held at the sign of the Craven Head, Drury Lane (London, 1806).

³ Articles of the Society of Journeymen Brushmakers, held at the sign of the Craven Head, Drury Lane (London, 1806). The account book of the little Preston Society of Carpenters, whose membership in 1807 averaged about 45,

resolved in 1826 "that tobacco be allowed to such members of this society as require it during the hours of business at any meeting of the society."¹

After the president the most important officers were, accordingly, the stewards or marshalsmen, two or four members usually chosen by rotation. Their duty was, to use the words of the cotton-spinners, "at every meeting to fetch all the liquor, and serve it regularly round";² and the members were, in some cases, "strictly forbidden to drink out of turn, except the officers at the table or a member on his first coming to town."³ Treasurer there was often none, the scanty funds, if not consumed as quickly as collected, being usually deposited with the publican who acted as host. Sometimes, however, we have the archaic box with three locks, so frequent among the gilds; and in such cases members served in rotation as "keymasters," or, as we should now say, trustees. Thus the Edinburgh shocmakers provided that "the keymasters shall be chosen by the roll, beginning at the top for the first keymaster, and at the middle of the roll for the youngest keymaster. If any refuse the keymaster, he shall pay one shilling and sixpence sterling."⁴ The ancient box of the Glasgow Ropemakers Friendly Society shows an expenditure at each meeting of 6s. to 7s. 6d. As late as 1837 the rules of the Steam-Engine Makers Society provided that one-third of the income — fourpence out of the monthly contribution of a shilling — "should be spent in refreshments." Some particulars as to the dying away of this custom are given in our *History of Trade-Unionism*, pp. 185, 186.

¹ MS. Minutes of the Manchester Typographical Society, 7th March, 1826.

² Articles, Rules, Orders and Regulations made and to be observed by the Friendly Associated Cottonspinners within the township of Oldham (Oldham, 1797).

³ Friendly Society of Ironfounders, Rules, 1809. The Rules of the Liverpool Shipwrights Society of 1784 provided also "that each member that shall call for drink without leave of the steward shall forfeit and pay for the drink they call for to the stewards for the use of the box. That the marshalsmen shall pay the overplus of drink that comes in at every monthly meeting more than allowed by the society; and no member of this society is allowed to call for or smoke tobacco during club hours in the club room; for every such offence he is to forfeit and pay fourpence to the stewards for the use of the box." — Articles to be observed by a Society of Shipwrights, or the True British Society, all Freemen (Liverpool, 1784), Articles 8 and 9.

⁴ Articles of the Journeymen Shoemakers of the City of Edinburgh (Edinburgh 1778) — a society established in 1727.

(established 1824), elaborately decorated with the society's "coat of arms," was kept in the custody of the president, who was elected annually.¹ Down to within the last thirty years the custom was maintained on the "deacons' choosing," or annual election day, of solemnly transporting this box through the streets of Glasgow to the house of the new president, with a procession of ropespinner's headed by a piper, the ceremony terminating with a feast. The keeping of accounts and the writing of letters was a later development, and when a clerk or secretary was needed, he had perforce to be chosen from the small number qualified for the work. But there is evidence that the early secretaries served, like their colleagues, only for short periods, and occupied, moreover, a position very subordinate to the president.

Even when it was necessary to supplement the officers by some kind of committee, so far were these infant democracies from any superstitious worship of the ballot-box, that, although we know of no case of actual choice by lot,² the committeemen were usually taken, as in the case of the Steam-engine Makers Society "in rotation as their names appear on the books."³ "A fine of one shilling," say the rules of the Southern Amicable Union Society of Woolstaplers, "shall be levied on any one who shall refuse to serve

¹ General Laws and Regulations of the Glasgow Ropemakers Trade Protective and Friendly Society (Glasgow, 1884). The members of the Glasgow Typographical Society resolved, in 1823, "that a man be provided on election nights to carry the box from the residence of the president to the place of meeting, and after the meeting to the new president's house." — MS. Minutes of general meeting, Glasgow Typographical Society, 4th October, 1823.

² The selection of officers by lot was, it need hardly be said, frequent in primitive times. It is interesting to find the practice in the Swiss *Landesgemeinden*. In 1640 the *Landesgemeinde* of Glarus began to choose eight candidates for each office, who then drew lots among themselves. Fifty years later Schwyz followed this example. By 1793 the *Landesgemeinde* of Glarus was casting lots for all offices, including the cantonal secretaryship, the stewardships of dependent territories, etc. The winner often sold his office to the highest bidder. The practice was not totally abolished until 1837, and old men still remember the passing round of the eight balls, each wrapped in black cloth, seven being silver and the eighth gilt. — *Les Alpes Suisses: Études Historiques et Nationales*, by Eugène Rambert (Lausanne, 1889), pp. 226, 276.

³ Rules of the Steam-engine Makers Friendly Society, edition of 1837.

on the committee or neglect to attend its stated meetings, and the next in rotation shall be called in his stead.”¹ The rules of the Liverpool Shipwrights declared “that the committee shall be chosen by rotation as they stand in the books ; and any member refusing to serve the office shall forfeit ten shillings and sixpence.”² As late as 1843 we find the very old Society of Curriers resolving that for this purpose

a list with three columns be drawn up of the whole of the members, dividing their ages as near as possible in the following manner : the elder, the middle-aged and the young ; so that the experience of the elder and the sound judgment of the middle-aged will make up for any deficiency on the part of the young.³

In some cases, indeed, the members of the committee were actually chosen by the officers. Thus in the ancient society of Journeymen Papermakers, where each “Grand Division” had its committee of eight members, it was provided that

to prevent imposition part of the committee shall be changed every three months, by four old members going out and four new ones coming in ; also a chairman shall be chosen to keep order, which chairman, with the clerk, shall nominate the four new members which shall succeed the four old ones.⁴

¹ Rules of the Southern Amicable Union of Woolstaplers (London, 1837).

² Articles to be observed by the Association of the Friendly Union of Shipwrights, instituted in Liverpool on Tuesday, November 11, 1800 (Liverpool, 1800), Rule 19. The London Sailmakers resolved, in 1836, “that from this evening the calling for stewards shall begin from the last man on the committee, and that from and after the last steward the twelve men who stand in rotation on the book do form the committee.” — MS. Minutes of general meeting, 26th September, 1836.

³ MS. Minutes, January, 1843.

⁴ Rules and Articles to be observed by the Journeymen Papermakers throughout England (1823), Appendix 18 to Report on Combination Laws, 1825. The only trade union in which this example still prevails is that of the Flint Glass Makers, where the rules until lately gave the secretary “the power to nominate a central committee (open to the objection of the trade), in whose hands the executive power of the society shall be vested from year to year.” — Rules and Regulations of the National Flint Glass Makers Sick and Friendly Society (Manchester, 1890). This has lately been modified, in so far that seven members are now elected, the central secretary nominating four “from the district in which he resides, but open to the objection of the trade.” — Rule 67 (Rules, reprinted with additions, Manchester, 1893).

The early trade club was thus a democracy of the most rudimentary type, free alike from permanent officials and from a representative or executive. Each member had an equal and identical share in the government of the society, and we may trace the existence of a strong prejudice in the workman against the setting apart of any of his fellows to form an administrative or governing class. Persistent efforts are accordingly made, through fines and free refreshments, to secure the attendance of the whole body of the members. The general meeting strives itself to transact all the business, and grudgingly delegates any of its functions either to officers or to committees. When this delegation can no longer be avoided, the expedients of rotation and short periods of service are used "to prevent imposition" or any undue influence by particular members. In this earliest type of trade-union democracy we find, in fact, the most childlike faith not only that "all men are equal," but also that "what concerns all should be decided by all."

It is obvious that this form of democracy was compatible only with the smallest possible amount of business. But it was, in our opinion, not so much the growth of the financial and secretarial transactions of the unions as the exigencies of their warfare with the employers that first led to a departure from this simple ideal. The legal and social persecutions to which trade-unionists were subject, at any rate up to 1824, made secrecy and promptitude absolutely necessary for successful operations; and accordingly at all critical times we find the direction of affairs passing out of the hands of the general meeting into those of a responsible, if not a representative, committee. Thus the London Tailors, whose militant combinations between 1720 and 1834 repeatedly attracted the attention of Parliament,¹ had practically two constitutions, one for peace and one for war. In quiet times, the society was made up of little autonomous general meetings of members at the

¹ See the interesting *Select Documents illustrating the History of Trade-Unionism: I. The Tailoring Trade*, edited by F. W. Galton (New York, Longmans, 1896), being one of the "Studies" published by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

thirty "houses of call" in London and Westminster, the arrangements corresponding essentially to those which we have described. The organization for war, as described in 1818 by Francis Place, was very different :

Each house of call has a deputy, who on particular occasions is chosen by a kind of tacit consent, frequently without its being known to a very large majority who is chosen. The deputies form a committee, and these again choose, in a somewhat similar way, a very small committee, in whom, on very particular occasions, all power resides, from whom all orders proceed, and whose commands are implicitly obeyed ; and on no occasion has it ever been known that their commands have exceeded the necessity of the occasion, or that they have wandered in the least from the purpose for which it is understood they are appointed. So perfect indeed is the organization, and so well has it been carried into effect, that no complaint has ever been heard ; with so much simplicity and with so great certainty does the whole business appear to be conducted that the great body of journeymen rather acquiesce than assist in any way in it.¹

Again, the protracted legal proceedings of the Scottish handloom weavers, ending in the great struggle when 30,000 looms from Carlisle to Aberdeen struck on a single day (November 10, 1812), were conducted by an autocratic committee of five, sitting in Glasgow, and periodically summoning from all the districts delegates who carried back to their constituents orders which were implicitly obeyed.² Throughout the dark days of smothered rebellion which preceded the repeal of the Combination Laws in 1824, the employers in all the organized trades complained bitterly of these "self-appointed" committees, and made repeated attempts to scatter them by prosecutions for combination or conspiracy. To this constant danger of prosecution may be ascribed some of the mystery which surrounds the actual constitution of these tribunals ; but their appearance on the scene whenever an emergency called for strong action was a necessary consequence of the failure of the clubs to provide any constitutional authority of a representative character.

¹ *The Gorgon*, No. 20, October 3, 1818.

² Evidence before Committee on Artisans and Machinery, 1824, especially that of Richmond.

So far we have dealt principally with trade clubs confined to particular towns or districts. When, in any trade, these local clubs united to form a federal union, or when one of them enrolled members in other towns, government by a general meeting of "the trade," or of all the members, became impracticable.¹ At this stage some kind of representative institutions would nowadays seem to have been inevitable. But it is sig-

¹ It is interesting to notice that a branch of a national union is still governed by the members in general meeting assembled; and for this and other reasons, it is customary for several separate branches to be established in large towns where the number of members becomes greater than can easily be accommodated in a single branch meeting-place. Such branches usually send delegates to a district committee, which thus becomes the real governing authority of the town or district. But in certain unions the idea of direct government by an aggregate meeting of the trade still so far prevails that, even in so large a center as London, resort is had to huge mass meetings. Thus the London Society of Compositors will occasionally summon its ten thousand members to meet in council to decide, in an excited mass meeting, the question of peace or war with their employers. And the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, which in its federal constitution adopts a large measure of representative institutions, still retains in its local organization the aggregate meeting of the trade as the supreme governing body for the district. The shoemakers of London or Leicester frequently hold meetings at which the attendance is numbered by thousands, with results that are occasionally calamitous to the union. Thus, when in 1891 the men of a certain London firm had impetuously left their work contrary to the agreement made by the union with the employers, their branch called a mass meeting of the whole body of the London members (seven thousand attending), which, after refusing even to hear the union officials, decided to support the recalcitrant strikers, with the result that the employers "locked out" the whole trade. (Monthly report of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, November, 1891.) In 1893 the union executive found it necessary to summon at Leicester a special delegate meeting of the whole society to sit in judgment on the London members who had decided, at a mass meeting, to withdraw from the national agreement to submit to arbitration. The circular calling the delegate meeting contains a vivid description of the scene at this mass meeting: "The hall was well filled, and Mr. Judge, president of the union, took the chair. From the outset it was soon found that the rowdy element intended to again prevent a hearing, and thus make it impossible for our views to be laid before the bulk of the more intelligent and reasonable members. . . . If democratic unions such as ours are to have the meetings stopped by such proceedings, . . . if the members refuse to hear, and insult by cock-crowing and cat-calls their own accredited and elected executive, then it is time that other steps be taken." The delegate meeting, by 74 votes to 9, severely censured the London members, and reversed their decision (Circular of Executive Committee, March 14, 1893: Special Report of the Delegate Meeting at Leicester, April 17, 1893). In most unions, however, experience has shown that in truth "aggregate meetings" are "aggravated meetings," and has led to their abandonment in favor of district committees or delegate meetings.

nificant to notice how slowly, reluctantly and incompletely the trade-unionists have incorporated in their constitutions what is often regarded as the specifically Anglo-Saxon form of democracy — the elected representative assembly, appointing and controlling a standing executive. Until the present generation, no trade union had ever formed its constitution on this model. It is true that in the early days we hear of ¹ meetings of delegates from local clubs to adopt or amend the “articles” of their association. A “deputation” from nine local societies of carpenters met thus in London in 1827 to form the Friendly Society of Operative House Carpenters and Joiners, and subsequent meetings of a similar character were annually held to revise the rules and adjust the finances of this federation. It would have been a natural development for such a representative congress to appoint a standing committee and executive officers to act on behalf of the whole trade. But when between 1824 and 1840 the great national societies of that generation settled down into their constitutions, the congress of elected representatives either found no place at all, or else was called together only at long intervals and for strictly limited purposes. In no case do we see it acting as a permanent supreme assembly. The trade union met the needs of expanding democracy by altogether new expedients. Instead of a representative assembly, the supreme authority was, as in the local trade clubs, “the voices” of the whole community,

¹ In the *History of Trade-Unionism*, p. 46, we described the hatters as holding, in 1772, 1775 and 1777, “congresses” of delegates from all parts of the country. Further examination of the evidence (*House of Commons Journals*, vol. xxxvi; *Place MS.*, 27,799-68; *Committee on Artizans and Machinery*) inclines us to believe that these “congresses,” like another in 1816, comprised only delegates from the various workshops in London. We can discover no instance during the eighteenth century of a trade-union gathering made up of delegates from the local clubs throughout the country. But though the congresses of the hatters probably represented only the London workmen, their “bye-laws” were apparently adopted by the clubs elsewhere, and came thus to be of national scope. Similar instances of national regulation by the principal center of a trade may be seen in the “resolutions” addressed “to the woolstaplers of England” by the London Society of Woolstaplers, and in the “articles to be observed by the Journeymen Papermakers throughout England,” formulated at a meeting of the trade at large held at Maidstone. In the loose alliances of the local clubs in each trade, the chief trade center often acted, in fact, as the “governing branch.”

expressed in the referendum. Instead of a cabinet dependent on such an assembly, we have the unique institution of "the governing branch." And contrary to the practice alike of political governments and of joint stock corporations, we find the civil service of this trade-union world chosen, not by the executive committee, but by direct vote of the whole body of members. To understand the origin, development and working of this remarkable experiment in democratic constitutions, we must examine each of its component parts and the relation between them.

The first step in the transition from the loose alliance of separate local clubs into a national organization was the appointment of "a seat of government" or "governing branch." The members residing in one town were charged with the responsibility of conducting the current business of the whole society, as well as that of their own branch. The branch officers and the branch committee of this town accordingly became the central authority.¹ Here again the leading idea was not so much to get a government that was representative of the society as to make each section take its turn at the

¹ In some of the more elaborate trade-union constitutions formulated between 1820 and 1834 we find a hierarchy of authorities, none of them elected by the society as a whole, but each responsible for a definite part of the common administration. Thus the Rules and Articles to be observed by the Journeymen Paper-makers in 1823 provide "that there shall be five Grand Divisions throughout England where all money shall be lodged, that when wanted it may be sent to any part where emergency may require." These "Grand Divisions" were the branches in the five principal centers of the trade, each being given jurisdiction over all the mills in the counties round about it. Above them all stood "No. 1 Grand Division" (Maidstone), which was empowered to determine business of too serious a nature to be left to any other Grand Division. This geographical hierarchy is interesting as having apparently furnished the model for most of the constitutions of the period, notably of the Owenite societies of 1833-1834, including the Builders Union and the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union itself. The same geographical hierarchy was a feature of the constitution of the Southern Amicable Society of Woolstaplers until the last revision of rules in 1892. In only one case has a similar hierarchy survived. The United Society of Brushmakers, established in the eighteenth century, is still divided into geographical divisions governed by the six head towns, with London as the center of communication. The branches in the West Riding, for instance, are governed by the Leeds committee, and when in 1892 the Sheffield branch had a strike, this was managed by the secretary of the Leeds branch.

privileges and burdens of administration. The seat of government was accordingly always changed at short intervals, often by rotation. Thus the Steam-Engine Makers' rules of 1826 provide that

the central branch of the society shall be held alternately at the different branches of this society, according as they stand on the books, commencing with Branch No. 1, and the secretary of the central branch shall, after the accounts of the former year have been balanced, send the books to the next central branch of the society.¹

In other cases the seat of government was periodically determined by vote of the whole body of members, who appear usually to have been strongly biased in favor of shifting it from town to town. The reason appears in this statement by one of the lodges of the ironfounders :

What, we ask, has been the history of nearly every trade society in this respect? Why, that when any branch or section of it has possessed the governing power too long, it has become careless of the society's interests, tried to assume irresponsible powers and invariably by its remissness opened wide the doors of peculation, jobbery and fraud.²

The institution of a "governing branch" had the advantage of being the cheapest machinery of central administration that could be devised. The far-reaching national union secured its executive committee, in fact, at no greater expense than a small local society. It is therefore not surprising that, with slight modifications which we shall hereafter describe, the governing branch has continued to form a feature in the majority of trade-union constitutions down to the present day. So long, indeed, as the function of the national executive was confined to that of a "center of communication" between practically autonomous local branches, or, to use the phrase of the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons, "a center of action that we may the more readily communicate with each other," no alteration

¹ Rule 19, in the Annual Report for 1837.

² Address of the Bristol branch of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders to the members at large (in Annual Report for 1849).

in the machinery was necessary. The duties of the secretary, like those of his committee, were not beyond the competence of ordinary artisans working at their trade and devoting only their evenings to their official business. But with the multiplication of branches and the formation of a central fund, the secretarial work of a national union presently absorbed the whole time of a single officer, to whom, therefore, a salary had to be assigned. The salary naturally came from the common fund, and hence we need not wonder that the right of appointment passed, without question, from the branch meeting to "the voices" of the whole body of members. This new departure raised the general secretary, whose authority emanated from the whole body of members, to a position of real superiority over the local committee drawn from one geographical section of them, under whose direction he was nominally to work. But although the force of circumstances convinced one trade union after another of the absolute necessity of appointing a single person to undertake the executive work, there appeared to be no such necessity for any delegative power exercised by the members collectively. The supreme authority continued to be "the voices." Every proposition not covered by the original "articles," together with all questions of peace and war, had to be submitted to the votes of the members.¹ But this was not all. Each branch, in general meeting assembled, claimed the right to have any proposition whatsoever submitted to the vote of the society as a whole. And thus we find, in almost every trade union which has a history at all, a most

¹ The very ancient United Society of Brushmakers, which dates from the early part of the eighteenth century, retains to this day its archaic method of collecting "the voices." In London, said to be the most conservative of all the districts, no alteration of rule is made without "sending round the box" as of yore. In the society's ancient iron box are put all the papers relating to the subject under discussion, and a member out of employment is deputed to carry the box from shop to shop until it has traveled "all round the trade." When it arrives at a shop, all the men cease work and gather round; the box is opened, its contents are read and discussed, and the shop delegates are then and there instructed how to vote at the next delegate meeting. The box is then refilled and sent on to the next shop. Old minutes of 1829 show that this custom has remained unchanged, down to the smallest detail, for, at any rate, a couple of generations. It is probably nearly two centuries old.

instructive series of experiments in the use, misuse and limitations of the referendum.

Such were the component parts of the typical trade-union constitution of the last generation. In a few cases it has survived, almost unchanged, down to the present day, just as its predecessor, the archaic local club governed by the general meeting, still finds representatives in the trade-union world. But wherever a trade union has maintained its vitality, this constitution has been progressively modified, whilst the most powerful of the modern unions have been formed on a different pattern. By noting the dangers and defects which led to the gradual alterations of the old type we shall not only appreciate the transitional character of the existing constitutional forms, but shall also gather from this varied experience of trade-union democracy some hints towards the solution, in a larger field, of the problem of uniting efficient administration with popular control.

The reader will have perceived that, in passing from a local to a national organization, the trade union unwittingly left behind the ideal of primitive democracy. The setting apart of one man from among the members to do the clerical work of the whole society destroyed the possibility of equal and identical service by all the members and laid the foundation of a separate governing class. The practice of requiring members to act in rotation was silently abandoned. Once chosen for his post, the general secretary could rely with confidence, unless he proved himself obviously unfit or grossly incompetent, on being annually reelected. Spending all day at office work, he soon acquired a professional expertness quite out of the reach of his fellow-members who remained at the bench or the forge. And even if some other member possessed natural gifts equal or superior to the acquired skill of the existing officer, there was, in a national organization, no opportunity of making these qualities known. The general secretary, on the other hand, was always advertising his name and his personality to the thousands of members by the printed circulars and financial reports, which became the only link between the scattered

branches, and which afforded positive evidence of his competency to perform the regular work of the office. With every increase in the society's membership, with every extension or elaboration of its financial system or trade policy, the position of the salaried official became, accordingly, more and more secure. The general secretaries themselves changed, moreover, with the development of their office. It was obvious, even when an actual vacancy had to be filled, that the post could not be taken by any ordinary artisan, and that some preliminary training in office work was almost indispensable. The coal-miners, for instance, as we have shown in our description of the trade-union world, have picked their secretaries to a large extent from a specially trained section, the checkweighmen.¹ The cotton operatives have even adopted what practically amounts to a system of competitive examination among the candidates for their staff appointments.² In other unions any candidate who has not proved his capacity for office work and trade negotiations would stand at a serious disadvantage in the election, where the choice is coming every day to be confined more clearly to the small class of minor officials. We see, in short, that the annual election of the general secretary by a popular vote, far from leading to frequent rotation of office and equal service by all the members, has, in fact, invariably resulted in permanence of tenure exceeding even that of the English civil servant. The paramount necessity of efficient administration has coöperated with this permanence in producing a progressive differentiation of an official governing class, more and more marked off by character, training and duties from the bulk of the members. It is accordingly interesting to notice that, in the later rules of some of the most influential of existing unions, the practical permanence of the official staff is tacitly recognized by the omission of all provision for reëlection. Indeed, the Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton-spinners goes so far as expressly to provide in its rules

¹ History of Trade-Unionism, p. 291.

² *Ibid.*, p. 294 ; see also our article on "The Method of Collective Bargaining," in the *Economic Journal* for June, 1896, where a specimen examination paper is reprinted.

that the general secretary "shall continue in office so long as he gives satisfaction."¹

While everything was thus tending to exalt the position of the salaried official, the executive committee, under whose direction he was placed, being composed of men working at their trade, retained its essential weakness. Though modified in unimportant particulars, it continued in nearly all the old societies to be chosen only by one geographical section of the members. At first each branch served in rotation as the seat of government. This quickly gave way to a system of selecting the governing branch from among the more important centers of the trade. Moreover, though the desire periodically to shift the seat of this authority long manifested itself and still lingers in some trades,² the growth of an official staff, and the necessity of securing accommodations on some durable tenancy, has practically made the headquarters stationary, even if the change has not been expressly recorded in the rules. Thus the Friendly Society of Ironfounders has retained its head office in London since 1846, and the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons since 1883. The United Society of Boilermakers, which long wandered from port to port, has remained in Newcastle since 1880; and finally settled the question in 1888 by building itself palatial offices on a freehold site.³ Here again the deeply rooted desire on the part of trade-union democrats to secure to each section an equal and identical share

¹ Rules of 1891.

² Notably the plumbers.

³ Along with this change has gone the differentiation of national business from that of the branch. The committee work of the larger societies became more than could be undertaken, in addition to the branch management, by men giving only their evenings. We find, therefore, the central executive committee becoming a body distinct from the branch committee, sometimes (as in the United Society of Operative Plumbers) elected by the same constituents, but more usually by the members of all the branches within a convenient radius of the central office. Thus the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters gives the election to the members within twelve miles of the head office—that is, to the thirty-five branches in and near Manchester—and the Friendly Society of Ironfounders to the six branches of the London district. In the United Society of Boilermakers the twenty lodges in the Tyne district, each in rotation, nominate one of the seven members of which the executive committee is composed.

in the government of the society has had to give way before the necessity of obtaining efficient administration. In ceasing to be movable the executive committee lost even such moral influence over the general secretary as was conveyed by an express and recent delegation by the remainder of the society. The salaried official, elected by the votes of all the members, could in fact claim to possess more representative authority than a committee whose functions as an executive depended merely on the accident of the society's offices being built in the town in which the members of the committee happened to be working. And as the general secretary developed into a trained official, dealing with a large and complicated business, it gradually became impossible for a committee of tired manual workers, meeting only in the evening, to exercise any effective control over his actions. In some societies, moreover, the idea of rotation of office has so far survived that the committeemen are elected for a short term and disqualified for reelection. The result is that such inexperienced amateur and casually selected committeemen find themselves totally incompetent to resist, or even to criticise, any practical proposal that may be brought forward by the permanent trained professional whom they are supposed to direct and control.¹

In face of so weak an executive committee the most obvious check upon the predominant power of the salaried officials was the elementary device of a written constitution. The ordinary workman, without either experience or imagination, fondly thought that the executive government of a great national organization could be reduced to a mechanical obedience to printed rules. We therefore watch in trade-union development the constant elaboration of the rules of the several societies, in the vain endeavor to leave nothing to the discretion of officers or committees. It was an essential part of the faith of these primitive democrats that the difficult and detailed work of drafting and amending these rules should not be delegated to

¹ The only organization, outside the trade-union world, in which the executive committee and the seat of government are changed annually, is, we believe, the Ancient Order of Foresters, the world-wide federal friendly society.

any particular person or persons, but should be undertaken by "the body" or "the trade" in general meeting assembled.¹

When a society spread from town to town, and a meeting of all the members became impracticable, the "articles" were settled, as we have mentioned, by a meeting of delegates, and any revision was undertaken by the same body. Accordingly, we find in the early history of such societies as the Ironfounders, Stonemasons, Carpenters, Coachmakers and Steam-Engine Makers frequent assemblies of delegates from the different branches, charged with supplementing or revising the somewhat tentative rules upon which the society had been based. But it would be a serious misconception to take these gatherings for "parliaments," with plenary power to determine the policy to be pursued by the society. The delegates came together only for specific and strictly limited purposes. Nor were even these purposes left to be dealt with at their discretion. In all cases that we know of the delegates were bound to decide according to the votes already taken in their respective branches. In many societies, indeed, the delegate was merely the vehicle by which "the voices" of the members were mechanically conveyed. Thus the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons, at that time the largest and most powerful trade union, held annual delegate meetings between 1834 and 1839 for the sole purpose of revising its rules. How

¹ This preference of trade-unionists for making their own rules will remind the political student that "direct legislation by the people" has an older and wider history with regard to the framing and revising of constitutions than with regard to ordinary legislation. Thus, already in 1779 the citizens of Massachusetts insisted on asserting, by popular vote, that a constitution should be framed, and equally on deciding that the draft prepared should be adopted. In 1818 the Connecticut constitution included a provision that any particular amendment to it might be submitted to the popular vote. In Europe the first constitution to be submitted to the same ordeal was the French constitution of 1793, which, though adopted, never came into force. The practice became usual with regard to the Swiss cantonal constitutions after the French Revolution of 1830, St. Gall leading the way in July, 1831. See the elaborate treatise of Charles Borgeaud on *The Adoption and Amendment of Constitutions* (New York, 1895); Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (London, 1891); and *Le Referendum*, by Simon Deploige (Brussels, 1892), of which an English translation by C. P. Trevelyan will shortly be published by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

limited was the power of this assembly may be judged from the following extract from an address of the central executive :

As the delegates are about to meet, the Grand Committee submit to all lodges the following resolutions in reference to the conduct of delegates. It is evident that the duty of delegates is to vote according to the instructions of a majority of their constituents, therefore they ought not to propose any measure unless recommended by the Lodges or Districts they represent. To effect this we propose the following resolutions: that each Lodge shall furnish their delegates with written instructions how to vote on each question they have taken into their consideration, and that no delegate shall vote in opposition to his instructions, and when it appears by examining the instructions there is a majority for any measure, it shall be passed without discussion.¹

The delegate meeting of 1838 agreed with this view. All lodges were to send resolutions for alterations of rules two months before the delegate meeting ; they were to be printed in the Fortnightly Return, and discussed by each lodge ; the delegate was then to be instructed as to the sense of the members by a majority vote ; and only if there was no decided majority on any point was the delegate to have discretion as to his vote. But even this restriction did not satisfy the Stonemasons' idea of democracy. In 1837 the Liverpool Lodge demanded that "all the alterations made in our laws at the grand delegate meeting" shall be communicated to all the lodges "for the consideration of our society before they are printed."² The central executive mildly deprecated such a course, on the ground that the amendment and passing of the law would under those circumstances take up the whole time of the society until the next delegate meeting came round. The request, however, was taken up by other branches, and by 1844 we find the practice established of making any necessary amendment in the rules by merely submitting the proposal in the Fortnightly Return, and adding together the votes taken in each lodge meeting. A similar change took place in such other

¹ Fortnightly Return, May, 1836 (the circular issued fortnightly to all the branches by the executive committee).

² Fortnightly Return, May, 1837.

great societies as the Ironfounders, Steam-Engine Makers and Coachmakers. The great bulk of the members saw no advantage in incurring the very considerable expense of paying the coach fares of delegates to a central town and maintaining them there at the rate of six shillings a day,¹ when the introduction of penny postage made possible the circulation of a fortnightly or monthly circular, through the medium of which their votes on any particular proposition could be quickly and inexpensively collected. The delegate meeting became, in fact, superseded by the referendum.²

By the term referendum the modern student of political institutions understands the submission to the votes of the whole people of any measure deliberated on by the representative assembly. Another development of the same principle is what is called the initiative, that is to say, the right of a section of the community to insist on its proposals being taken into consideration by the representative assembly. As a representative assembly formed no part of the earlier trade-union constitutions, both the referendum and the initiative took with them the crudest shape. Any new rule or amendment of a rule, any proposed line of policy or particular application of it, might be straightway submitted to the votes of all the members. Nor was this practice of consulting the members confined to the central executive. Any branch might equally have any proposition put to the vote through the medium of the society's official circular. And however imperfectly the question was

¹ In 1838 a large majority of the lodges of the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons voted "that on all measures submitted to the consideration of our Society, the number of members be taken in every Lodge for and against such a measure, and transmitted through the district Lodges to the Seat of Government, and in place of the number of Lodges, the majority of the aggregate members to sanction or reject any measures." — Fortnightly Return, January 19, 1838.

² It is interesting to find that in at least one trade union the introduction of the referendum is directly ascribed to the circulation in England in 1850 and 1860 of translations of pamphlets by M. Rittinghausen and Victor Considérant. It is stated in the Typographical Circular for March, 1889, that John Melson, a Liverpool printer, got the idea of "Direct Legislation by the People" from these pamphlets, and urged its adoption on the union, at first unsuccessfully, but at the 1861 delegate meeting with the result that the referendum was adopted as the future method of legislation.

framed, however inconsistent the result might be with the society's rules and past practice, the answer returned by the members' votes was final and instantly operative. Those who believe that pure democracy implies the direct decision, by the mass of the people, of every question as it arises, will find this ideal realized without check or limit in the history of the larger trade unions between 1834 and 1870. The result was significant and full of political instruction. Whenever the union was enjoying a vigorous life we find, to begin with, a wild rush of propositions. Every active branch had some new rule to suggest, and every issue of the official circular was filled with crude and often inconsistent projects of amendment. The executive committee of the United Kingdom Society of Coachmakers, for instance, had to put no fewer than forty-four propositions simultaneously to the vote in a single circular.¹

It is, indeed, difficult to convey any adequate idea of the variety and in some cases the absurdity of these propositions. To take only those recorded in the annals of the Stonemasons between 1838 and 1839: We have one branch proposing that the whole society should go in for payment by the hour, and another that the post of general secretary should be put up to tender, "the cheapest to be considered the person to be elected to that important office."² We have a delegate meeting referring to a vote of the members the momentous question whether the central executive should be allowed "a cup of ale each per night," and the central executive taking a vote as to whether all the Irish branches should not have Home Rule forced upon them. The members, under fear of the coming Parliamentary enquiry, vote the abolition of all "regalia, initiation and pass-words," but reject the proposition of the Newcastle Lodge "for reducing the hours of labor as the only method of striking at the root of all our grievances." The central executive is driven to protest against "the continual state of agitation in which the society

¹ Quarterly Report, June, 1860.

² The sale of public offices by auction to the highest bidder was a frequent incident in the Swiss *Landesgemeinden* of the seventeenth century. See Eugène Rambert's *Les Alpes Suisses: Études Historiques et Nationales*, p. 225.

has been kept for the last ten months by the numerous resolutions and amendments to laws, the tendency of which can only be to bring the laws and the society into disrespect.”¹ As other unions come to the same stage in development, we find a similar result. “It appears,” complains the executive committee of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders, “that we have got into a regular proposition mania. One branch will make propositions simply because another does ; hence the absurd and ridiculous propositions that are made.”² The system worked most disastrously in connection with the rates of contributions and benefits. It is not surprising that the majority of workmen should have been unable to appreciate the need for expert advice on these points, or that they should have disregarded all actuarial considerations. Accordingly, we find the members always reluctant to believe that the rate of contribution must be raised, and generally prone to listen to any proposal for extending the benefits — a popular bias which led many societies into bankruptcy. Still more disintegrating in its tendency was the disposition to appeal to the votes of the members against the executive decision that particular individuals were ineligible for certain benefits. In the United Kingdom Society of Coachmakers, for instance, we find the executive bitterly complaining that it is of no use for them to obey the rules, and rigidly to refuse accident benefit to men who are suffering simply from illness; as in almost every case the claimant’s appeal to the members, backed by eloquent circulars from his friends, has resulted in the decision being overruled.³ The Friendly Society of Ironfounders took no fewer than nineteen votes in a single year, nearly all on details of benefit administration.⁴ And the executive of the Stonemasons had early occasion to protest against the growing practice under which branches, preparatory to taking a vote, sent circulars throughout the society in support of their claims to the redress of what they deemed to be personal grievances.⁵

¹ Fortnightly Return, July, 1838.

² Ironfounders Monthly Report, April, 1855.

³ United Kingdom Society of Coachmakers, Quarterly Report, September, 1859.

⁴ Report for 1869.

⁵ Fortnightly Circular, January 18, 1849.

The disadvantages of a free resort to the referendum soon became obvious to thoughtful trade-unionists. It stands to the credit of the majority of the members that wild and absurd propositions were almost uniformly rejected; and in many societies a similar fate became customary in case of any proposition that did not emanate from the responsible executive. The result in these cases was the practical abandonment of the initiative. Branches got tired of sending up proposals which uniformly met with defeat. But the right of the whole body of members themselves to decide on every question that might arise was too much bound up with their idea of democracy to permit of its being directly abrogated, or even expressly criticised. Where the practice did not die out from sheer weariness, it was quietly got rid of in other ways. What happened was that in one society after another the central executive and the general secretary—the men who were in actual contact with the problems of administration—silently threw their influence against the practice of appealing to the members' vote. Thus the executive committee of the United Society of Coachmakers made a firm stand against the members' habit of overruling its decision in the grant of benefits under the rules. The executive claimed the sole right to decide who was eligible under the rules, and refused to allow discontented claimants to appeal through the official circular. This caused great and recurring discontent; but the executive committee held firmly to their position and eventually maintained it. When thirteen branches of the Operative Bricklayers Society proposed in 1868 that the age for superannuation should be lowered and the office expenses be curtailed, the general secretary bluntly refused to submit such inexpedient proposals to the members' vote, on the excuse that the question could be dealt with at the next delegate meeting.¹ The next step was to restrict the number of opportunities for appeals on any questions whatsoever. The Coachmakers' executive announced that, in future, propositions would be put to the vote only in the annual report, instead of quarterly as heretofore, and this restriction was a few years later embodied

¹ Monthly Circular, April, 1868.

in the rules.¹ Even more effectual was the enactment of a rule throwing the expense of taking a vote upon the branch which had initiated it, in case the verdict of the society proved to be against the proposition. Another device was to seize the occasion of a systematic revision of rules to declare that no proposition for their alteration was to be entertained for a specified period : one year, said the General Union of Carpenters in 1863 ; three years, declared the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons in 1878 ; ten years, ordained the Operative Bricklayers Society in 1889.² Finally, we have the referendum abolished altogether, as regards the making or alteration of rules. In 1866 the delegate meeting of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters decided that the executive should "not take the votes of the members concerning any alteration or addition to rules, unless in cases of great emergency, and then only on the authority of the General Council."³ In 1878 the Stonemasons themselves, who forty years previously had been enthusiastic in their passion for voting on every question whatsoever, accepted a rule which confined the work of revision to a specially elected committee.

Thus we see that half a century of practical experience of the initiative and the referendum has led, not to its extension, but to an even stricter limitation of its application. Two main reasons for this evolution in trade-union history may be traced. The attempt to secure the participation of every member in the management of his society was found to lead to instability in legislation, dangerous unsoundness of finance and general weakness of administration. The result was the early abandonment of the initiative either by express rule or through the persistent influence of the executive. Where branches insisted on their right, the members practically took the matter into their own hands by steadily negating all propositions which were not endorsed by executive approval. This, however, produced a further shifting of the balance of power in trade-union constitutions.

¹ Quarterly Report, November, 1854. Rules of 1857.

² Monthly Report, October, 1889.

³ Monthly Circular, April, 1866.

When the right of putting questions to the vote came practically to be confined to the executive, the referendum ceased to provide the members with any effective control. If the executive could choose the issues to be submitted, the occasion on which the question should be put, and the form in which it should be couched, the referendum, far from supplying any counterpoise to the executive, was soon found to be an immense addition to its power. Any change which the executive desired could be stated in the most plausible terms and supported by convincing arguments, which almost invariably secured its adoption by a large majority. Any executive resolution could, when occasion required, thus be given the powerful moral backing of a plebiscitary vote. The reliance of trade-union democrats on the referendum resulted, in fact, in the virtual exclusion of the general body of members from all real share in the government. And when we remember the practical subordination of the executive committee to its salaried permanent officer, we shall easily understand that the ultimate effect of such a referendum as we have described was a further strengthening of the influence of the general secretary, who drafted the propositions, wrote the arguments in support of them, and edited the official circular which formed the only means of communication with the members.

We see, therefore, that almost every influence in the trade-union organization has tended to magnify and consolidate the power of the general secretary. If democracy could furnish no other expedient of popular control than the mass meeting, the annual election of public officers, the initiative and the referendum, trade-union history makes it quite clear that the mere pressure of administrative needs would inevitably result in the general body of citizens losing all effective control over the government. It would not be difficult to point to influential trade unions at the present day which, possessing only a single permanent official, have not progressed beyond the stage of what is virtually a personal dictatorship. But it so happens that the very development of the union and its business which tends, as we have seen, to increase the influence of the general secretary,

calls into existence a new check upon his personal authority. If we examine the constitution of a bank or joint stock company, or any other organization not formed by the working class, we shall find it almost invariably the rule that the chief executive officers are appointed, not by the members at large, but by the governing committee, and that these officers are allowed a free hand, if not absolute power, in the choice and dismissal of their subordinates. Any other plan, it is contended, would seriously detract from the efficient working of the organization. Had the trade unions adopted this course, it is obvious that the general secretary would have been absolutely supreme. But working-class organizations in England have, almost without exception, tenaciously clung to the direct election of all officers by the general body of members. Whether the post to be filled be that of assistant secretary at the head office or district delegate to act for one part of the country, the members have jealously retained the appointment in their own hands. In the larger trade societies of the present day the general secretary finds himself, therefore, at the head, not of a staff of docile subordinates who owe office and promotion to himself, but of a humber of separately elected functionaries, each holding his appointment directly from the members at large.¹ Any attempt at a personal dictatorship is thus quickly checked. There is more danger that friction and personal jealousies may unduly weaken the administration. But the usual result is the close union of all the salaried officials to conduct the business of the society in the way they think best. Instead of a personal dictatorship, we have, therefore, a closely combined and practically irresistible bureaucracy.

Under a constitution of this type the trade union may attain a high degree of efficiency. The United Society of Boilermakers and Ironshipbuilders (established 1832 ; membership in

¹ Even the office staff has been, until quite recently, invariably recruited by the members from the members ; and only in a few unions has it begun to be realized that a shorthand clerk or trained bookkeeper, chosen by the general secretary or the executive committee, can probably render better service at the desk than the most eligible workman trained to manual labor. The Operative Bricklayers Society, however, lately allowed their executive committee to appoint a shorthand clerk.

December, 1895, 39,629), for instance, is admittedly one of the most powerful and best conducted of English trade societies. For the last twenty years its career, alike in good times and bad, has been one of continuous prosperity. For many years past it has dominated all the shipbuilding ports, and it now includes practically every ironshipbuilder in the United Kingdom. As an insurance company it has succeeded in paying, even in the worst years of an industry subject to the most acute depressions, benefits of an unusually elaborate and generous character. Notwithstanding these liberal benefits, it has built up a reserve fund of no less than £154,000. Nor has this prosperity been attained by any neglect of the militant side of trade-unionism. The society, on the contrary, has the reputation of exercising stricter control over the conditions of its members' work than any other union. In no trade, for instance, do we find a stricter and more universally enforced limitation of apprentices, or a more rigid refusal to work with non-unionists. And, as we have elsewhere described, no society has more successfully concluded and enforced elaborate national agreements applicable to every port in the kingdom. Moreover, this vigorous and successful trade policy has been consistent with a marked abstention from strikes — a fact due not only to the financial strength and perfect combination of the society, but also to the implicit obedience of its members, and the ample disciplinary power vested in and exercised by the central executive.

The efficiency and influence of this remarkable union is, no doubt, largely due to the advantageous strategic position which has resulted from the extraordinary expansion of ironshipbuilding. It is interesting, however, to notice what a perfect example it affords of a constitution retaining all the features of the crudest democracy, but becoming, in actual practice, a bureaucracy in which effective popular control has sunk to a minimum. The formal constitution of the Boilermakers Society still includes all the typical features of the early trade union. The executive government of this great national society is vested in a constantly changing committee, the members of which,

elected by a single district, serve only for twelve months, and are then ineligible for reëlection during three years. All the salaried officials are separately elected by the whole body of members, and hold their posts only for a prescribed term of two to five years. Though provision is made for a delegate meeting in case the society desires it, the rules, and even the rates of contribution and benefit, can be altered by aggregate vote ; and even if a delegate meeting assembles, its amendments have to be submitted to the votes of the branches in mass meeting. Any branch, moreover, may insist that any proposition whatsoever shall be submitted to this same aggregate vote. The society, in short, still retains the form of a trade-union democracy of the crudest type.¹

But although the executive committee, the branch meeting and the referendum occupy the main body of the society's rules, the whole policy has long been directed and the whole administration conducted exclusively by an informal cabinet of permanent officials which is unknown to the printed constitution. Twenty years ago the society had the good fortune to elect as general secretary Mr. Robert Knight, a man of remarkable ability and strength of character, who has remained the permanent premier of this little kingdom. During his long reign, there has grown up around him a staff of younger officials, who, though severally elected on their individual merits, have been in no way able to compete with their chief for the members' allegiance. These district delegates are nominally elected only for a term of two years, just as the general secretary himself is elected only for a term of five years. But, for the reasons we have given elsewhere, all these officials enjoy a permanence of tenure practically equal to that of a judge. Mr. Knight's unquestioned superiority in trade-union statesmanship, together with the invariable support of the executive committee, have enabled him to construct out of the nominally independent district delegates a virtual cabinet, alternately serving as counsellors on high issues of policy and as ministers

¹ Some modifications of the constitution have recently been made, but have not yet come into effect.

carrying out in their own spheres that which they have in council decided. From the written constitution of the society, we should suppose that it was from the evening meetings of the little Newcastle committee of working platers and riveters that emanated all those national treaties and elaborate collective bargains with the associated employers that have excited the admiration of economic students. But its unrepresentative character, the short term of service of its members and the practical rotation of office make it impossible for the constantly shifting executive committee to exercise any effective influence over even the ordinary routine business of so large a society. The complicated negotiations involved in national agreements are absolutely beyond its grasp. What actually happens is that, in any high issue of policy, Mr. Knight summons his district delegates to meet him in council at London or Manchester, to concert and even to conduct with him the weighty negotiations which the Newcastle executive formally endorses. And although the actual administration of the benefits is conducted by the branch committees, the absolute centralization of funds and the supreme disciplinary power vested in the executive committee make that committee, or rather the general secretary, as dominant in matters of finance as in trade policy. The only real opportunity for an effective expression of the popular will comes to be the submission of questions to the aggregate vote of the branches in mass meeting assembled. It is needless to point out that a referendum of this kind, submitted through the official circular in whatsoever terms the general secretary may choose, and backed by the influence of the permanent staff in every district, comes to be only a way of impressing the official view on the whole body of members. The actual result has for many years been to make the general secretary and his informal cabinet absolutely supreme.

In the case of the Boilermakers, government by an informal cabinet of salaried officials has, up to the present time, been highly successful. It is, however, obvious that a less competent statesman than Mr. Knight would find great difficulty in

welding into a united cabinet a body of district officers separately responsible to the whole society, and nominally subject only to their several district committees. Under these circumstances any personal friction or disloyalty might easily paralyze the whole trade policy, upon which the prosperity of the society depends. Moreover, though under Mr. Knight's upright and able government the lack of any supervising authority has not been felt, it cannot but be regarded as a defect that the constitution provides no practical control over a corrupt, negligent or incompetent general secretary. The only persons in the position to criticise effectually the administration of the society are the salaried officials themselves, who would naturally be indisposed to risk their offices by appealing, against their official superior, to the uncertain arbitrament of an aggregate vote. Finally, it must be observed that, however successful this bureaucratic cabinet may be, the government, with all its parade of democratic form, secures in reality to the ordinary plater or riveter little if any active participation in the central administration of his trade union. No real opportunity is given to him for expressing his opinion ; and, indeed, no call is made upon his intelligence for the formation of any opinion whatsoever. In short, the Boilermakers, so long as they enjoy the invaluable services of Mr. Knight, secure efficient administration at the expense of losing all the educative influences and safeguards of democracy.

Among the well-organized coal miners of the North of England the theory of "direct legislation by the people" is still in full force, with the result that their unions present a marked contrast to that of their neighbors, the boilermakers. Thus, the 18,482 members of the Northumberland Miners Mutual Confident Association (established 1863) decide every question of policy, and even many merely administrative details, by the votes taken in the several lodge meetings ;¹ and although a delegate meeting is held every quarter, and by a rule of 1894 is expressly declared to "meet for the purpose of deliberating

¹ See, for instance, the twenty-five separate propositions voted on in a single batch, June 9, 1894. — Northumberland Miners Minutes, 1894, pp. 23-26.

free and untrammelled upon the whole of the programme," its function is strictly limited to expressing its opinion, the entire list of propositions being then "returned to the lodges to be voted on."¹ The executive committee, moreover, is elected not by the delegates, but by the general body; and the members, who retire after only six months' service, are ineligible for reëlection. Finally, we have the fact that the officers are dependent neither on the executive committee nor on the delegate meeting, but are themselves elected by the members at large. To this lack of organic connection between the different parts of the constitution, the student will perhaps attribute a certain instability of policy manifested in successive popular votes. In June, 1894, a vote of all the members was taken on the question of joining the Miners Federation, and an affirmative result was reached by 6730 to 5807. But in the very next month, when the lodges were asked whether they were prepared to give effect to the well-known policy of the Federation and claim the return of reductions in wages amounting to sixteen per cent, which they had accepted since 1892, they voted in the negative by more than two to one; and

¹ Rule 15. We see here a curious instance of the express separation of the deliberative from the legislative function, arising out of the inconvenient results of the use of the imperative mandate. The committee charged with the revision of the rules in 1893-1894 reported that "the present mode of transacting business at delegate meetings has long been felt to be very unsatisfactory. Suggestions were sent in for programme which are printed and remitted to the lodges, and delegates are then sent with hard and fast instructions to vote for or against as the case may be. It not unfrequently happens that delegates are sent to support a vote against suggestions which are found to have an entirely different meaning, and may have a very different effect from those expected by the lodges when voting for them. To avoid the mischief that has frequently resulted from our members thus committing themselves to suggestions upon insufficient information, we suggest that after the programmes have been sent to the lodges, lodges send their delegates to a meeting to deliberate on the business, after which they shall return and report the results of the discussion and then forward their votes by proxy to the office. To carry out this principle, which we consider is of the greatest possible interest and importance to our members, no more meetings will be required or expense incurred than under the present system, while on the other hand lodges will have the opportunity of casting their votes on the various suggestions with full information before them, instead of in the absence of this information in most cases, as at present." — Report of February 3, 1894, in *Northumberland Miners Minutes*, 1894, p. 87.

backed this up by an equally decisive refusal to contribute towards the resistance of other districts. "They had joined a Federation knowing its principles and its policy, and immediately after joining they had rejected the principles they had just embraced," was the comment of one of the members of their own executive committee.¹ This inconsistent action led to much controversy, and the refusal of the Northumberland men to obey the decision of the special conference, the supreme authority of the Federation, was declared to be inconsistent with their remaining members of the organization. Nevertheless, in July, 1894 they again voted, by 8445 to 5507, in favor of joining the Federation, despite the powerful adverse influence of their executive committee. The Federation officials not unnaturally asked whether the renewed application for membership might now be taken to imply a willingness to conform to the policy of the organization which it was wished to join. On this a further vote was taken by lodges, when the proposition to join was negatived by a majority of over five to one.²

It may be objected that, in this instance of joining the Miners Federation, the question at issue was one of great difficulty and of momentous import to the union, and that some hesitation on the part of the members was only to be expected. We could, however, cite many similar instances of contradictory votes by the Northumberland men, on both matters of policy and points of internal administration. We suggest, indeed, that their experience is only another proof

¹ Report of Conference, September 23, 1893, in *Northumberland Miners Minutes*, 1893.

² It should be explained that the referendum among the Northumberland Miners takes two distinct forms, the "ballot," and the so-called "proxy voting." Questions relating to strikes, and any others expressly ordered by the delegate meeting, are decided by a ballot of the members individually. The ordinary business remitted from the delegate meeting to the lodges is discussed by the general meeting of each lodge, and the lodge vote or "proxy" is cast as a whole according to the bare majority of those present. The lodge vote counts from one to thirty, in strict proportion to its membership. It is interesting to note (though we do not know whether any inference can be drawn from the fact) that the two votes in favor of the Federation were taken by ballot of the members, whilst those against it were taken by the "proxy" of the lodges.

that, whatever advantages may be ascribed to government by the referendum, it has the capital drawback of not providing the executive with any policy. In the case of the Northumberland Miners Union, the result has been a serious weakening of its influence, and, on more than one occasion, the gravest danger of disintegration.¹ Fortunately, the union has enjoyed the services of executive officers of perfect integrity, and of exceptional ability and experience. These officers have throughout had their own clearly defined and consistent policy, which the uninformed and contradictory votes of the members have failed to control or modify.

It will not be necessary to give in detail the constitution of the Durham Miners Association (established 1869), since this is, in essential features, similar to that of the Northumberland Miners.² But it is interesting to notice that the Durham experience of the result of government by the referendum has been identical with that of Northumberland,³ and even more detrimental to the organization. The Durham Miners Association, notwithstanding its closely concentrated 58,274 members, fails to exercise any important influence on the trade-union world, and even excites complaints from the employers as to "its internal weakness." The Durham coal-owners declare that, with the council overruling the executive, and the ballot vote reversing the decision of the council, they never know when they have arrived at a settlement, or how long that settlement will be enforced on a recalcitrant lodge.

It is significant that the newer organizations which have sprung up in these same counties in direct imitation of the miners' unions give much less power to the members at large.

¹ See, for instance, the report of the special conference of September 23, 1893, expressly summoned to resist the "disintegration of our Association." — Northumberland Miners Minutes, 1893.

² In the Durham Miners Association the election of officers is nominally-vested in the council, but express provision is made in the rules for each lodge to "empower" its delegate how to vote.

³ This may be seen, for instance, from the incidental references to the Durham votes given in the Miners Federation Minutes, 1893-1894; or, with calamitous results, in the history of the great Durham strike of 1892; or in that of the Silkstone strike of 1891. The Durham Miners Minutes are not accessible to any non-member.

Thus the Durham Cokemens and Laborers Association, which, springing out of the Durham Miners Association in 1874, follows in its rules the actual phrases of the parent organization, vests the election of its executive committee and officers in a supreme "council." Much the same may be said of the Durham County Colliery Enginemens Mutual Aid Association, established 1872; the Durham Colliery Mechanics Association, established 1879; and (so far as regards the election of officers) the Northumberland Deputies Mutual Aid Association, established 1887.

If, therefore, democracy means that everything which "concerns all should be decided by all," and that each citizen should enjoy an equal and identical share in the government, trade-union history indicates clearly the inevitable result. Government by such contrivances as rotation of office, the mass meeting, the referendum and the delegate restricted by his imperative mandate leads straight either to inefficiency and disintegration, or to the uncontrolled dominance of a personal dictator or an expert bureaucracy. Dimly and almost unconsciously this conclusion has, after a whole century of experiment, forced itself upon the more advanced trades. The old theory of democracy, it is true, still survives in full strength, and constantly comes to the front when any organization has to be formed for brand-new purposes;¹ but it is significant that the last twenty years

¹ We may refer, by way of illustration, to the frequent discussions during 1894-1895 among the members of the political association styled the "Independent Labor Party." On the formation of the Hackney Branch, for instance, the members "decided that no president and no executive committee of the branch be appointed, its management devolving on the members attending the weekly conferences" (*Labour Leader*, January 26, 1895). Nor is this view confined to the rank and file. The editor of the *Clarion* himself, perhaps the most influential man in the party, expressly declared in his leading article of November 3, 1894: "Democracy means that the people shall rule themselves; that the people shall manage their own affairs; and that their officials shall be public servants, or delegates, deputed to put the will of the people into execution. . . . At present there is too much sign of a disposition on the part of the rank and file to overvalue the talents and usefulness of their officials. . . . It is tolerably certain that in so far as the ordinary duties of officials and delegates, such as committeemen or members of Parliament, are concerned, an average citizen, if he is thoroughly honest, will be found quite clever enough to do all that is needful. . . . Let all officials be retired after one year's services, and fresh ones elected in their place."

have witnessed a marked change in trade-union constitutions. The old ideal of the rotation of office among all the members in succession has been practically abandoned. Resort to the aggregate meeting diminishes steadily in frequency and importance. The use of the initiative and the referendum has been silently given up in all complicated issues, and has been gradually limited to a few special questions on particular emergencies. The delegate finds himself every year dealing with more numerous and more complex questions, and tends therefore inevitably to exercise the larger freedom of a representative. Finally, we have the appearance in the trade-union world of the typical form of democracy in its modern sense, the elected representative assembly, appointing and controlling an executive committee under whose direction the permanent official staff performs its work. The working of this form is reserved for treatment in another paper.

SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB.

LONDON, ENGLAND.